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ABSTRACT

This paper describes LEARNing Visions, a K-12 intervention program for at-risk youth in Jackson County, Tennessee, involving a partnership between the schools, local businesses, Tennessee Technological University, and Visions Five (a private company). Jackson County is characterized by an undereducated population, a high employment rate, and a low per capita income. For 1989-90, the dropout rate was 24.2 percent, and 42 percent of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunches. The project aims to reduce the number of school dropouts and targets all students in the four county schools. Program components include: (1) ensuring school attendance through daily monitoring of absentees and follow-up contacts with students and families; (2) academic interventions that include the services of a full-time teaching assistant, curriculum enhancement, and faculty development; (3) encouraging parental involvement by informing parents of school endeavors, creating a school climate that welcomes parents, and involving parents in meaningful ways with formal education; (4) additional counseling services aimed at crisis prevention through conflict resolution, early intervention, and freer access to counseling; (5) activities involving the business and professional community in providing career awareness and preparation; and (6) increased communication between school and community social services to provide better coordination of social services for children and parents. Initial observations indicate improvements in student attendance, communication with parents, educational technology, curriculum, and tutoring services. Basic educational attitudes of students, families, and teachers are changing slowly. (LP)

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LEARNING VISIONS

We have a VISION of the children of Jackson County LEARNING the knowledges, skills and attitudes necessary to complete high school and become adults who can EARN a living for themselves and their families.

I. INTRODUCTION

LEARNing Visions is a partnership project between the Jackson County (TN) Schools, businesses in Jackson County, Tennessee Technological University, and Visions Five. Jackson County is located in upper eastern Middle Tennessee on the western highland rim of the Cumberland Plateau, a part of the Upper Cumberland region in Southern Appalachia. The Upper Cumberland region, which as been recognized as a distinct physiographic and cultural region since the nineteenth century, consists of twenty-five counties in upper eastern Middle Tennessee and south central Kentucky equidistant from Nashville, Knoxville, and Chattanooga. The population is undereducated with a high unemployment rate and a low per capita income. The dropout rates for the schools in the region have long been among the highest the nation.

Jackson County was settled by hardy farmers and woodsmen. The bottom land around the river was lush and good farm land, but the hillsides were rocky and difficult to farm. The woods were full of a variety of game to be hunted and trapped, and the river provided good fishing and trapping.

It was the river, however, that was the basis of the local economy. The river ran through Gainsboro, the county seat. Gainsboro developed into a center of the local economy, the place where the hill folks, the bottom-land farmers, and the trappers came to barter and to trade. Staples and evolving necessities were unloaded from boats on the river, while local crops and furs went up and down the river.

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Over time, Gainsboro and Jackson County profited and grew. Banks and stores were built, and became permanent and vital parts of the community. Many children attended good local schools, went off to college, and returned to be doctors and lawyers and professionals. It was a good place for many to raise a family. It was a place almost isolated from the ills of the outside world.

Over time, the world came in and Jackson County went out. Cookville, just over the hill in Putnam County, developed into a big town and provided employment opportunities. Tennessee Tech in Cookville grew and provided opportunities for entry into the larger world. The interstate was just up the hill (it ran through Cookville), and Nashville was now in commuting distance, not a day's trip away. The lush bottom farm land was lost to a federal project and many families moved out. The river traffic was lost to roads and rail, and to larger towns.

Jackson County lost many of its better educated children to the opportunities of the world. But, to much of the world, Jackson County was an opportunity. Land is cheap and so is the cost of living. Housing projects provide affordable shelter. The wooded hillsides provide isolation and privacy.

Many families move in to get away form the crime and violence of the city. But they, like many of the remaining families in Jackson County, are often undereducated and unemployed. Much of Jackson County today must eke out a living like the original pioneers who came over the hills and down the river. But the world has changed, and the requirements for survival, particularly economic, are greater today than they were then.

II. NEED FOR THE PROJECT

Jackson County has a low per capita income ($9,162), a high unemployment rate (8.1% in January 1991), a low educational level (67.5% of adults 25 and over in 1980 were <u>not</u> high school graduates, and a limited economic base as reflected by the low per pupil expenditures for education ($3,102). Of all families in Jackson County, 22.4% are below the poverty level; 24.9% of individuals in the county are below the poverty level.

<u>Dropout Data</u>

The following data represent the children who dropped out of the Jackson County schools during the five recent academic years.

Graduating Class	Number in Seventh Grade	Number who Graduated	Percent who Dropped Out
Class of 86	116	104	10.34%
Class of 87	134	84	37.31%
Class of 88	118	83	29.66%
Class of 89	129	96	25.58%
Class of 90	124	85	31.45%

For 1989-90, the Tennessee Department of Education reported a dropout rate of 24.2% for Jackson County. Historically, Jackson County has had one of the highest dropout rates in Tennessee.

Socioeconomic Data

The economic distress of Jackson County is reflected in the percentages of students qualifying for free and reduced price lunch. Totaling free and reduced price students yields a total of 56% of the students qualifying. In 1989-90, 42.0% of the students in Tennessee qualified for free or reduced price lunch.

School	Free Lun No/%	Red. Lun No/%	Pay Lun No./%	Total Students
Gainesboro Elem K-4	209/46%	74/16%	170/37%	452
Fox Middle 5-8	158/42%	61/16%	154/41%	373
Dodson Branch K-8	38/54%	14/2%	18/26%	70
Jackson Co HS 9-12	128/32%	51/13%	227/60%	406
Jackson County Schools	533/41%	200/15%	569/44%	1301

Indicators of At-risk Population

In addition to the dropout rate and the socioeconomic indicator of lunch status, data are available which further document the at-risk nature of the student clientele of Jackson County. The following data are for the 1990-91 school year.

School	Special Education	Chapter I Reading	Chapter I Math	Vocational Program
Gainesboro Elem (K-4)	80/18%	88/19%	59/13%	-
Fox Middle (5-8)	50/13%	112/30%	124/33%	-
Dodson Br. (K-8)	11/16%	19/27%	12/17%	-
Jackson Co High(9-12)	33/8%	0	0	88(VocSch) 297(JCHS)
Total	174	219	195	385

In 1989-90, 14.8% of the students in Tennessee were in Special Education, 11.9% were in Chapter I programs, and 46.1% of secondary students were enrolled in vocational education classes.

According to a survey completed by Jackson County students in grades 6-8 during the spring of 1990, a high percentage of parents have less than a high school education. The educational levels of parents are of more concern when compared between poor students (students qualifying for free or reduced price lunch) and parents of other students.

Educational Level	Fathers of Poor Stu.	Fathers of Others.	Mothers of Poor Stu.	Mothers of Other
Less than high school	26.62%	2.13%	20.81%	6.25%
Some high school	25.6%	18.44%	34.90%	16.78%
High School Graduate	32.37%	52.48%	31.54%	49.65%
Some College	5.04%	13.48%	7.38%	10.49%
College Graduate	2.88%	13.48%	5.37%	16.78%

According to the 1990 census the population of Jackson County is 9,297, of which 9,247 are white, 7 are black, 19 are Indian, 19 are Asian, 38 are Hispanic, and 5 are other. There are no students in the schools who identify themselves as minority.

III. DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

LEARNing Visions is a K-12 intervention program for at-risk Upper Cumberland youth. It includes curriculum enhancement and modification of instructional strategies K-12, a culturally sensitive approach to monitoring and encouraging school attendance, parent education, and enhanced social services delivery to school-age children and their families. The project was designed by a committee consisting of Jackson County Schools administrators, teachers, parents, TTU Director of Rural Education, and the chief executive officer of Visions Five. All schools in the system participated in the planning process. The Tennessee facilitator for the National Diffusion Network assisted in the identification of validated programs to meet identified needs.

The project integrates a variety of strategies, some which have already been successfully initiated on a limited basis in the system for which there are inadequate resources to provide them at the needed level, replication of selected validated projects from the National Diffusion Network, one program now being used in an adjoining school system, and some new strategies designed to supplement and complement the others. It is envisioned that these carefully selected components will have a synergistic result of changing at-risk students attitudes toward themselves and school and providing a comprehensive K-12 experience that meets their academic and personal development needs.

The project builds on a previous dropout prevention effort implemented with Appalachian Regional Commission support at Fox Middle School but is much broader in scope, more comprehensive in approach, and addresses all students in the school system. It reaches out into the community to families and their needs as a vehicle for keeping children in school. Unlike the previous project which was based primarily on subjective assessment of student needs and program deficiencies, this project is designed around needs identified in a major research study of characteristics of rural youth (See list of references.) and substantial input from teachers and parents in the planning process. The research study will be used as base line qualitative and quantitative data for project evaluation and for the longitudinal study of students proposed as a part of this project.

The goal of this project is to reduce the number of young people in Jackson County, Tennessee, who do not complete their elementary and secondary education by reducing the number of students dropping out of school. The project is focused throughout the Jackson County School System and includes each of the four schools: Jackson County High School, Fox Middle School, Gainesboro Elementary School, and Dodson Branch Elementary School and the Adult Education Program. The project is a comprehensive, coordinated effort to impact school change throughout the system to increase the effectiveness of the schools in meeting the needs of

an at-risk clientele. The project builds on data collection for at-risk student identification already being developed.

Project Components

LEARNing Visions has six major components built around specific project objectives. While each component may be described separately, the components interface within the context of the school and community to create an environment in which all students in the system may access project services related to their particular needs.

Component I: School Attendance. The first priority of the project is to ensure that all students attend school regularly. The project employs an attendance monitor who checks with each school each day to determine absentees. A telephone call to each home follows to determine the nature of the absence. If the absence is legitimate, assistance in determining missed assignments, delivery of school materials, referrals to social/ health services and other appropriate positive interventions are offered. Students are encouraged to return to school as soon as possible. If the absence does not appear to be legitimate, a discussion is held with the parent about the importance of school attendance. Chronic absentees are referred to the Attendance Supervisor. At the middle school, in-school suspension is provided as an alternative to suspension. Pregnant teenagers are identified and provided assistance in obtaining needed social services, transfer to home bound instruction during critical periods, and encouragement to return to school as soon as possible. A journal is maintained on each child, recording all attendance contacts with the child and family. This longitudinal record is useful in working with families when patterns of dysfunction are detected.

Component II: School Achievement. Once students are in school, efforts are made to help them be successful in the academic program. The nature of academic interventions differs from school to school but in each case includes the services of a full-time teaching assistant, curriculum enhancement, and faculty staff development.

At Gainesboro Elementary (K-4) the project teaching assistance moves from classroom to classroom working with individuals and small groups of children who request help or whom the teacher identifies as needing extra help. Often this help is requested for students who have been absent and are behind with their work. The teaching assistant also conducts early morning tutoring sessions for students needing assistance. The Comprehensive School Mathematics Program (CSMP) has been implemented in all grades and the teachers have begun staff development in whole language.

At Dodson Branch School (K-8), the teaching assistant works with students at one grade level while the classroom teachers work with another grade level in these multi-grade classrooms. As at GES, the assistant provides individual student assistance and early morning tutoring. The curricular programs that have been added at DBS include Comprehensive School Mathematics Program and Study Skills Across the Curriculum.

At Fox Middle School (5-8), the teaching assistant directs student activities in a computer learning laboratory and supervises students on in-school suspension. Students are referred to the laboratory by teachers or request to attend. ERIC abstracts and an encyclopedia are available via CD Rom. Academic assistance is provided two mornings a week by the teaching assistant and a teacher. Curricular additions at Fox include Study Skills Across the Curriculum, Project Discovery (pre-vocational training), Saxon Mathematics in pre-Algebra and Algebra, and Strategic Reasoning. Staff development on cooperative learning is this year's focus.

At Jackson County High School (9-12), the teaching assistant directs student activities in a computer learning laboratory similar to the one at Fox. In addition to the academic software purchased through this project, the laboratory also includes eight terminals networked to a microprocessor housing an integrated learning system. The teaching assistant and teachers provide after school academic assistance. Saxon Mathematics has been implemented in the algebra classes. Selected faculty have been involved in the study skills and cooperative learning staff development. Through another project, two teachers are conducting an experimental biology/Algebra II project teaching prescribed content around the study of water quality in a nearby stream.

During the summer, a summer school program is provided for remediation and enrichment. The enrichment includes the study of and travel to sites of scientific and historical interest.

Component III: Parental Involvement. In a community in which the majority of the adults are not high school graduates, parents are generally reluctant to become involved in the schooling of their children. An on-going thrust of the project is to inform parents of school endeavors, create a school climate welcoming to parents, and involve parents in increasingly meaningful ways with formal education. Specific activities include regular newsletters from each school and the project, a parent coffee at each school for the parents of new students (K at GES and DBS, 5 at Fox, 9 at JCHS, and transfer students), parent education events at other functions, and regular communication between parents and teachers. The goal is that each parent will receive one positive communication about each child during each grading period. The frequent telephone calls from the project attendance monitor have also been useful in establishing dialogue with parents.

Component IV: Counseling Services. The project has enabled the school system to employ an additional counselor. As a result, there is now a full time counselor at JCHS, a full time counselor for K-4, and a full time counselor for 5-8 (These two counselors share responsibility for DBS). In addition a private counselor has worked in the schools for one or two days a week conducting small group sessions and meeting with students who have requested help in major personal problems. The additional counseling services have moved from crisis intervention toward and increasing emphasis on crisis prevention through conflict resolution, early intervention, and freer access to counseling. The counselors at each school use a variety of media to teach such topics as self-esteem, drug abuse prevention, interpersonal skills, career awareness,

Component V: Career Awareness and Preparation. A previous study of middle school students had shown that these students had unrealistic perceptions of careers available, life styles associated with various careers, and the education and training requirements for particular careers. Efforts to correct those perceptions include use of a pre-vocational exploratory program in grades 5-8. Originally it was planned for most teachers to integrate one or more of the program modules into their instructional program. When that did not work as well as desired, a member of the business community was brought into the school on a part-time basis to implement a career exploration mini-course using prepared modules and his own experience. Other members of the business and professional community participate in the annual middle school Career Day. Apprenticeship programs for high school students in the community's business incubator project are being explored. The guidance staff includes a variety of career aptitude activities and career awareness presentations in their group counseling program. Several cooperative programs are being planned with the TTU Career Equity Center.

Component VI: Coordination of Social Services for Children and Parents. Historically, rural school personnel have been largely ignorant of available social services and how to access those services for students. Rural social service agencies have tended to stand behind their responsibilities for client confidentiality to the extent that communication between school personnel and agency personnel was limited and non-functional. One primary responsibility of the LEARNing Visions Project Director has been to determine what services are available, learn and publicize the procedures and requirements for accessing those services, and determine any services which are needed but unavailable. This has been a slow process but is bearing fruit as the various personnel involved are beginning to communicate more openly within the constraints of their positions, discuss problems of children and families, and work together to match services with needs. At this point the LEARNing Visions staff knows who to contact given any particular set of circumstances, and agency personnel respond appropriately.

The assumption is made that it is not the responsibility of the school system to provide social services, but it is its responsibility to facilitate the access of needed services. Two social service roles for which the project staff is assuming a more active role include creating a clothing bank and forming a support group for students who are pregnant or who have children.

IV. Current Status of the Project

LEARNing Visions is halfway through its second year of operation. Two additional years of federal support are possible. At this point, the following observations might be made.

1. The project has been integrated into the school system and is recognized as a part of the institution. Project staff are no longer strangers in the schools. Students and teachers understand their role and seek them out for appropriate needs.

2. The technology which this project has purchased combined with that available through another project has made a significant impact on the resources available to students at the high school and the attitudes of some students toward learning. Students stand in line for access to the integrated learning system and the reference materials on CD-Rom.

3. While reaction to each curricular innovation is different, the study skills program and the new secondary mathematics program are the most successful.

4. Student attendance has improved. Students and parents know that if a student is not in school, that absence will be questioned immediately and there will be consistent follow-up.

5. Communication strategies with parents are appreciated. Newsletters, teacher positive telephone calls, and the beginning of school coffees are making the parents feel more involved and more comfortable.

6. The teaching assistants and tutoring program are effective in providing extra help to students as soon as needs are identified. There is no time-consuming referral process and teachers are not burdened with the responsibility for students who have been absent.

7. The investment of time and energy in building bridges with social service agencies has enhanced the image of the schools with those agencies and has enabled student and family needs to be met more quickly and more effectively than in the past.

8. The project is allowing longitudinal access to this at-risk population to enable the project consultant and evaluator to learn more about the causes of school dropouts in a depressed rural community. This is part of a larger study involving rural students in other settings.

9. Although extensive staff development has been conducted, many teachers continue to teach as they always have with little visible impact from the efforts made. It is too soon to predict the impact which whole language and cooperative learning will have in the schools.

10. Basic attitudes of families, students, and teachers toward the education process are changing slowly as a result of the project. It is at that level that change must occur if the dropout problem is to be solved.